The Untold Story of Heidegger in France

Dominique Janicaud’s *Heidegger en France* is a major work of grand proportion, a unique intellectual undertaking of breathtaking scope reconstituting in two volumes the history of the French reception of Heidegger, from its earliest stages in the late twenties to today.\(^1\) One “certainty” has guided Dominique Janicaud in this enterprise: “With respect to the certainties, what inspires us straightaway is already confirmed: the omnipresence in France of an influence, direct or indirect, of the work and the thought of Heidegger. Aside from the ‘hard core’ exact sciences, earth and life sciences, there is no domain of knowledge and intellectual activity, which has not been affected, positively or negatively, by the effects of that thought” (*HF*, 501). The first volume is the narrative of that history, the second a series of interviews with various philosophers and authors providing their own accounts of their relationship with Heidegger. This intellectual history of the French reception of Heidegger’s work also amounts to a history of twentieth-century French Philosophy itself since, as Janicaud shows throughout, contemporary French philosophy has, to a large extent, constituted itself in a dialogue with Heidegger’s thought, whether by embracing it, rejecting it, or misunderstanding it! Jacques Derrida, for instance, explains in his interview with Janicaud that Heidegger is a kind of *contre-maître* for him (literally, a *counter-master*, but which, in French, has the colloquial sense of a work supervisor, someone in position of authority who watches over someone else, often disapprovingly).\(^2\) Here as well Derrida plays on the sense of “being against,” as in “going against” the master: “When I say ‘against the order of Heidegger,’ this means that he is haunting me . . . always watching over me and berating me . . . He haunts me like a severe father” (*HF*, 2:115). This description of Derrida’s relation to Heidegger might serve as an accurate illustration of Heidegger’s place in French philosophy: A master from whom and against whom one thinks.

The volume reconstitutes, both through synthetic analyses and in minute details, the way in which Heidegger has had a major influence—in a striking and unique way—on twentieth-century French philosophy, in particular on such thinkers as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Althusser, not to mention Blanchot and
Ricoeur, among others. Such an enterprise fills a gap in the literature and is an important contribution in the context of so many discussions and debates regarding Heidegger’s place in contemporary philosophy. In fact, as Janicaud notes in the opening pages of the volume: “Despite the great number of translations, interpretations, polemical interventions, there has never been any attempt to write out in French the whole history of the reception—particularly eventful and unpredictably rich—of probably the most original thought of the century” (HF, 22). The tone of this narration, consistently balanced and measured, combined with impeccable scholarship and documentation, is also very refreshing. Polemical works have their place and necessity, but they must yield to the serious work of the historian, a role that Janicaud deliberately assumes in this opus magnum. The result is a welcomed departure from the intellectual terrorism that so often affects research, a brilliant synthesis of seventy years of French philosophy, well written, in a lucid and jargon-free prose.

The principal qualities of this work, as I alluded, are first and foremost its fairness, its constant attempt at being equitable, its effort in attaining some level of objectivity, as much as this is possible: Janicaud is not trying to “settle accounts”; his reading is instead one of a “generous” or “benevolent” neutrality. It also comes as close as possible to an exhaustive account, combining an intimate knowledge of that history (as attested by the more personal, autobiographical “epilogues” inserted between the main chapters) with a keen understanding of the various philosophical positions and interpretations, as well as the “little” history of the conflicts and interactions among the protagonists. As Janicaud explains in his introduction, it is a matter of restitution of the threads of both the great and “little” history, knitting together, as it were, Geschichte and Historie. In its attention to details, its investigative flavor, and inquisitiveness, the book reads at times like a veritable spy story. Janicaud displays an impressive mastery of the material in question—facts, texts, and commentaries, as well as of the underlying philosophical assumptions. The major stages of that history are revisited: from Levinas’ first commentaries on Heidegger’s early works (Levinas was the one who first introduced Heidegger in France); to Sartre’s magisterial (mis)appropriation of the key moments and vocabulary of Being and Time in Being and Nothingness; to the explosion after the war of existentialism and the famed “Letter on Humanism” addressed to Jean Beaufret, a key figure in the French reception of Heidegger; to Heidegger’s visit in France in the mid-fifties at the Cerisy meeting